

The Story So Far

A magic ring was forged by the dwarf Alberich out of gold he stole from the Rhinemaidens. The ring gives its owner control over all the wealth in the world, and Alberich used it to amass a great fortune. Wotan, king of the gods, hired two giants to construct the fortress Valhalla. To pay them, Wotan seized Alberich's hoard, including the ring as well as a magic helmet that gives its wearer powers of transformation. Alberich put a curse on the ring. The giant Fafner took the treasure, then transformed himself into a dragon. Alberich and Wotan both aspired to regain the ring, but Wotan was forced by the laws engraved on his spear to cease intervening in the world's affairs. On reaching manhood, Wotan's mortal grandson Siegfried reforged his father's broken sword, Notung. He slew Fafner, taking the ring and magic helmet. He came to a mountaintop encircled by flames. Plunging through the fire, he encountered a sleeping woman, Brünnhilde. (She had once been a Valkyrie, one of Wotan's immortal daughters, but Wotan stripped her of her divinity and punished her after she attempted to protect Siegfried's father in battle.) He awakens her and she became his bride.

Prelude

The three Norns spin the rope of destiny. They recall how Wotan cut a branch from the World Ash Tree to create his spear. The spear, the symbol of Wotan's sovereignty, was unknowingly broken by Siegfried. Powerless now, Wotan has encircled Valhalla with stacks of wood and assembled all of the gods within, where they await a cataclysmic fire that will bring about their inevitable destruction. The rope of destiny breaks; unable to divine what will happen next, the Norns return to their mother, the earth goddess Erda.

Siegfried, exulting in his love for Brünnhilde, gives her the ring he took from Fafner's hoard. Seeking adventure, he takes her horse Grane, and leaves her protected by the flames once again, swearing to dedicate his future victories to her.

Act One

In the Hall of the Gibichungs along the banks of the Rhine River, the king Gunther seeks advice from his half-brother Hagen about whom he should marry. Hagen proposes that Gunther marry Brünnhilde. He suggests that Gunther's sister Gutrune ensnare Siegfried with a love potion; Siegfried could then easily be convinced to win Brünnhilde for Gunther, who would be unable to penetrate the flames that surround her.

Siegfried approaches, and Gunther welcomes him as a friend. Hagen asks Siegfried about Fafner's vast treasure; he is astonished to learn that Siegfried has kept only the magic helmet and ring. Gutrune offers Siegfried a drink, and when the love potion takes effect, Siegfried instantly forgets his bride. Drinking an oath of blood brotherhood with Gunther, Siegfried agrees to win Brünnhilde for Gunther. Left alone, Hagen reveals that he is Alberich's son and secretly hopes to win the ring.

Alone on the mountaintop, Brünnhilde is visited by one of her Valkyrie sisters, Waltraute. Brünnhilde hopes that the visit signifies Wotan's forgiveness. Instead, Waltraute warns her that the world as they know it will come to an end unless Brünnhilde's ring is returned to the Rhinemaidens, removing its curse. Refusing to part with the ring that Siegfried pledged to her, Brünnhilde sends Waltraute away.

As night falls, Siegfried uses the magic helmet to return in Gunther's form. Terrified, Brünnhilde tries to fend him off, but he overpowers her and takes the ring

away. He vows that his sword Notung will lie between them during the night, separating the pair until morning.

Act Two

As Hagen sleeps, Alberich urges his son to avenge him by regaining the ring. Siegfried has exchanged places with Gunther, who soon enters with Brünnhilde. The vassals welcome their king's new bride and prepare for a double wedding. Brünnhilde is bewildered to find Siegfried there, wearing the ring which she believed Gunther had taken from her. She reveals that she is Siegfried's wife. With no recollection of their past relationship, Siegfried swears that he has not acted falsely, while Brünnhilde demands that he die for his apparent treachery.

Brünnhilde is left alone with Gunther and Hagen, who asks how Siegfried might be defeated in battle. Brünnhilde tells him that a magic spell guards him, leaving only his back unprotected, for the fearless hero would never flee from an enemy. She scorns Gunther as a coward for having Siegfried use the magic helmet to win a bride. As he plans Siegfried's murder, Hagen decides to tell Gutrune that her husband was killed in a hunting accident.

Act Three

The three Rhinemaidens hope for the return of their gold. When Siegfried draws near while hunting, they unsuccessfully try to convince him to give them his ring.

Hagen and Gunther approach. As they rest together, Hagen adds a potion of remembrance to Siegfried's drink. Gunther is shocked to hear Siegfried vividly recall his first night alone with Brünnhilde. Hagen thrusts his spear into Siegfried's back, and the hero dies, thinking only of his love for Brünnhilde.

Gutrune uneasily awaits Siegfried's return from the hunt, and is horrified when Hagen enters at the head of a procession bearing Siegfried's body. Gunther reveals that Hagen was responsible. When both men claim the ring, Hagen kills Gunther. The dead Siegfried's hand rises menacingly as Hagen reaches for the ring. Brünnhilde enters, realizing now that both she and the blameless Siegfried were duped. She orders that a great funeral pyre be built for him. Taking the ring from his finger, she vows to join him in the fire; the Rhinemaidens will be free to retrieve the ring from the ashes. She asks the ravens, Wotan's sentinels, to fly back to Valhalla with the news of the gods' coming destruction. She leaps into the flames, joining her beloved in death. As the fire blazes up, the Rhine floods its banks, and Hagen drowns in his final attempt to possess the ring. The Rhinemaidens take back the ring, cleansed of Alberich's curse at last. Valhalla is seen bursting into flames. The reign of the gods is over.—*Synopsis by Mark Lyons*